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TRIUMPHANT PEACE OR PYRRHIC VICTORY?

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It is premature to hail the Kosovo peace agreement as an unabashed “triumph” for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic has broken every Balkan peace agreement he ever has initialed. Assuming the 15-member United Nations Security Council approves the resolution authorizing the deployment of a peacekeeping force in Kosovo, NATO will commit 50,000 troops, to include 7,000 Americans, to a costly, open-ended peacekeeping mission.

As the experience in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and Bosnia suggests, achieving a fragile truce is one thing but securing a durable, self-sustaining peace is quite another. At this point, many details regarding the anticipated Kosovo peace agreement remain unclear. What is clear, however, is that NATO’s air campaign, Operation Allied Force, yielded a Pyrrhic victory for the people of Kosovo. NATO made a tragic miscalculation that President Milosevic would fold after only three days of bombing. Instead of stopping him, however, NATO’s incremental bombardment provided President Milosevic with a pretext to accelerate and intensify his ethnic cleansing campaign. The Kosovar Albanians paid a heavy price in blood for NATO’s error. Repairing Kosovo’s war-torn infrastructure will cost the West billions of dollars; even with this effort, however, thousands of Kosovar refugees may never return.

Milosevic Wins Concessions. The West yet again has made Slobodan Milosevic a partner to a shaky Balkan peace agreement. Recently indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal, President

Milosevic has a track record of violating such agreements. Although weakened militarily by NATO’s air campaign, he remains capable of additional mischief in the region. Indeed, President Milosevic has established a pattern of giving ground on one front only to instigate trouble elsewhere. Among other possibilities, he could destabilize the pro-Western government in the Republic of Montenegro or threaten the Hungarian minority in the Serb province of Vojvodina.

In two important respects, President Milosevic has secured an even better deal than the one he refused at the Rambouillet peace talks in February 1999. First, the agreement would provide him with a stronger guarantee of Yugoslavia’s “sovereignty and territorial integrity” regarding Kosovo. Absent in this agreement is any reference to a future referendum to settle Kosovo’s political status, a key provision in the Rambouillet proposal. Under the present agreement, NATO would become, in effect, the long-term guarantor of Yugoslavia’s sovereignty over Kosovo.

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Second, the anticipated peacekeeping force in Kosovo ("Joint Guardian") would operate under the auspices of the U.N. and include both NATO and non-NATO countries. The Rambouillet proposal called for an all-NATO force, operating without the mandate of the U.N. Under the new agreement, Russia and China, two countries that supported Yugoslavia diplomatically during the conflict, would have to approve the Security Council resolution specifying the civil and military responsibilities of the peacekeeping force. Their involvement could complicate the task of establishing streamlined command-and-control relationships necessary for effective peacekeeping.

Open-Ended Peacekeeping Deployment.

NATO nevertheless has committed itself to another open-ended peacekeeping deployment in the Balkans. Plans for Operation Joint Guardian call for 50,000 troops, to include 7,000 Americans. Taking into account the need to rotate troops periodically, this commitment would tie up an entire U.S. Army division for perhaps an entire generation. It would place additional stress on the U.S. military, which was stretched thin even before Operation Allied Force began in March.

Once deployed, the Kosovo peacekeeping force would face significant risks. The Yugoslav forces have seeded the province with thousands of mines, which will complicate NATO's effort to secure the return of the 1 million refugees displaced by President Milosevic's ethnic cleansing campaign. NATO would find it difficult to convince the refugees that it was safe to return home. The experience in Bosnia, to which the majority of refugees steadfastly refused to return, is not encouraging. Moreover, in the aftermath of the sustained bombing campaign, the Serb minority in Kosovo is unlikely to welcome U.S., British, French, German, and Italian troops as neutral peacekeepers. Terrorist reprisals should be expected.

The peace agreement also calls for NATO-led forces to execute one of President Milosevic's long-standing aims: the demilitarization of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). This provision would represent a grave challenge for NATO; guerrilla armies

are difficult to disarm even under the best of circumstances. In Northern Ireland, the disarmament issue has brought the implementation of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement to a virtual standstill. After months of fierce fighting with Yugoslav forces, the KLA is understandably reluctant to relinquish its weapons under a peace agreement that affirms Yugoslavia's sovereignty over Kosovo. A concerted attempt by the NATO-led peacekeeping force to disarm the KLA forcibly would risk a Somalia-like disaster, in which the United States incurred the hostility of the very people it had hoped to assist.

More generally, the peacekeeping deployment would hasten NATO's transformation from a defensive military alliance to a Balkan constabulary force, a process that was already well under way with NATO's open-ended commitment in Bosnia. The Kosovo peacekeeping mission would bring the overall number of NATO troops in the Balkans to 81,000, including 13,000 Americans.

Conclusion. Americans should be thankful that NATO did not bungle into a costly ground war in Kosovo and that the bombing campaign did not fracture the alliance. That said, both the short- and long-term costs of NATO's "triumph" are sobering. Operation Allied Force clearly has strained U.S. relations with Russia and China, for example. And thousands of Kosovar Albanians are dead or displaced because NATO misjudged of President Milosevic's resolve.

Even if NATO succeeded in securing a ceasefire and the withdrawal of all Yugoslav forces from Kosovo, it still would be far from winning a durable, self-sustaining peace. Although the final costs of intervening in Kosovo cannot be tallied at this point, this much is clear: Implementation of the peace agreement, whatever its final form, will be time-consuming, expensive, and perilous to NATO and U.S. troops.

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